



Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
Admiral Scott H. Swift
USS Oklahoma Memorial Ceremony
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii
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As delivered

Good Afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be with you on this historic day.

It seems appropriate to first frame how special this seventy-fifth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor and it surrounding bases is. We often talk about “once in a lifetime opportunities.” All of us gathered here, together, on this 75th anniversary, mark in what is in many ways a “last in a lifetime opportunity.” The reality is that, while our yearly remembrance of the attack is always an important event, we do tend to think of twenty-five year milestones as more significant. The next milestone like that will be the 100th in 2041.

I am sure it will be a huge event, but there will be no first-hand accounts and no opportunity for those who have faced the crucible of war to reassure those of us in uniform that we too have what it takes residing deep within us, even if we have not been tested. Those Service members gathered at the 100th will not have the privilege to stand in the presence of Pearl Harbor survivors, struck by their humility, and awed by the strength and depth of the bonds forged between those that stepped into and survived that crucible, and those that had stepped in but had not stepped out, framed so often in the anguished question, “Why wasn’t I taken as well?”

So in that context, while all anniversaries are important, the 75th commemoration of the attack on Pearl Harbor is particularly special as the survivors and their families are here with us. We are grateful for their many sacrifices then and now, but most grateful for the example they have set for us. They are living records of the wounds our nation endured on December 7th, 1941 and of the resilience that allowed us to fight back, turn the tide of war, and ultimately achieve peace and reconciliation with former adversaries.

That path began here in Pearl Harbor in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and it led our Pacific nation to grow from a Pacific power to the Pacific power. Sailors who serve today on Pearl Harbor and throughout the Pacific embody that proud heritage.

It's hard for many to appreciate what the morning of December 7th was like for Pearl Harbor Sailors 75 years ago. Hollywood comes close, but really, it's the voices of the survivors and their stories that best capture the surprise, the fear, the anger and the determination that so many experienced that morning -- the uncertainty of mind, followed by the certainty of action.

Of the ships damaged or sunk that morning, the loss of life on USS Oklahoma was second only to USS Arizona. Here today, we honor the 429 Sailors who gave their lives that morning, as well as the survivors whose stories continue to inspire both current and future generations.

The number of Oklahoma survivors who are with us each year is dwindling, and we are very fortunate that Sailors like Ray Richmond traveled with his family from San Diego to be part of this year's commemoration. Peter Nichols, a former Oklahoma Sailor, is also with us, and while he transferred to Kaneohe airfield a few months before the attack, he also fought back that morning. And Roy Carter, another Oklahoma sailor has joined us as well.

In his preliminary damage report, Oklahoma's commanding officer estimated that there was one minute and ten seconds between the explosions of the first and fifth torpedoes to hit Oklahoma. Put another way, just over two minutes passed from the first torpedo hit and the order to abandon ship. Less than fifteen minutes after the attack began, Oklahoma was on her side.

When the first Japanese torpedo hit the ship, young Raymond Richmond was taking his morning shower. After the torpedo stuck, and as the subsequent torpedoes struck, finding their mark, he found himself struggling through darkness and explosions to get topside. Ray jumped overboard as the Oklahoma was rolling over on her side, breaking his back during the fall.

He struggled to swim across to the USS Maryland, several times diving below the surface that was covered with burning oil.

At the waterline next to USS Maryland, he couldn't get up the rope ladder on his own, and in their panic, sailors stepped over him as they climbed the ladder themselves.

He was finally helped up by a shipmate from Oklahoma. Once onboard, despite broken back, Ray manned an anti-aircraft battery and fought alongside the crew for over two hours, as did so many of his Oklahoma shipmates.

In the aftermath of the attack, he collapsed from exhaustion and was so covered in dirt and oil that those responsible for collecting bodies thought Raymond was dead, until he woke up in the back of the vehicle they had placed him in. This is just one story from a battle that was fought by Service members that woke that morning as everyday Sailors, Soldiers, Airmen, Marines and Coast Guardsmen and retired that night as heroes all.

Peter Nichols is another such hero. As his former shipmates fought for their lives in Pearl Harbor, he was busy attacking the onslaught of Japanese fighters with a bolt-action Springfield rifle, the only weapon he could lay his hands on, as they attacked his new duty station of Kaneohe airfield.

Oklahoma's ordeal didn't end when the Japanese ceased the attack. Many Sailors were trapped in compartments below decks as the ship rolled over.

And perhaps one of the most compelling stories is the story of Roy Carter. Roy Carter was a carpenter's mate and damage controlman, and his assignment was to save the ship by sealing a watertight compartment. And in doing that, he sealed eight sailors within the compartment, not knowing their fate, brought about by his actions.

Many Sailors were trapped in compartments below decks as the ship rolled over. They banged on bulkheads and pipes to get the attention of potential rescuers. In a testament to what civilian Sailors brought to the fight, thirty-two trapped Oklahoma Sailors, including the eight sealed within the compartment by Roy Carter, were rescued in the next two days by Navy shipyard workers, using chisels and air hammers to free them. In hindsight, it turns out that the lives of those eight sailors were in Roy's hands, and they lived because of his actions on that morning.

Sailors like Raymond, Peter, and Roy, and those shipyard workers displayed the Navy's core attributes of toughness, initiative, integrity, and accountability that morning. They made sure that what the adversary intended as the first and last battle of a short war was only the opening act. They rejected putting themselves first despite an innate, organic drive to first survive. Their refusal to accept defeat then still resonates throughout Pacific Fleet now, and remains a great source of inspiration and strength, and fortitude, and forms the core of what is now often referred to as the "American fighting spirit."

It is in the context of these realities that I have been so honored to share a few thoughts with you this this morning. As the Pacific Fleet Commander who resides as the thirty-fifth resident of Nimitz House, I am reminded every morning when I awaken, of the incredible lesson we were provided here in this harbor on December seventh, 1941. A lesson that was as relevant when President Roosevelt stepped to the Congressional podium on December 8th as it is today, and as it will be for all our tomorrows as Americans. The words may have been President Roosevelt's that day, but the actions they reflected were already history, written here by the likes of Ray Richmond, Peter Nichols and the rest of those called to action that fateful morning.

So, gathered here as we are, we represent a grateful Pacific nation, and a proud Pacific Fleet, steeped in the heritage born from the history made here, 75 years ago. Thank you all. May God bless each of you and this great nation we all serve.